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Europe's helpless foreign policy

Instead of a common foreign policy, national selfishness dominates in the EU – a gift for countries like China and Turkey

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The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) suffers from its member states having competing interests. But this comes as no news. As early as the 1970s, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously complained that Europe doesn't have its own phone number. Although Kissinger can no longer remember having actually made that statement, the lack of coherence in European foreign policy today is more present than ever. Since the Commission under Ursula von der Leyen took office, a dangerous twin trend has arisen, where the new Commission's aspirations are rapidly moving away from an increasingly divided EU foreign policy reality.

The new Commission's term of office even started out quite promising on foreign policy. Ursula von der Leyen declared that she would lead a 'geopolitical Commission' to strengthen Europeans' self-confidence in foreign policy and to shape a better global order. These efforts were accompanied by the appointment of experienced foreign affairs politician Josep Borrell as the new High Representative for the EU's foreign affairs and security policy. Borrell, who at the time of the appointment was Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs and a former President of the European Parliament, is known in the global arena for his direct manner. It was therefore not surprising that he announced ambitious goals when he took office. He maintained that the EU must relearn the 'language of power' and use the full potential of its various instruments to accomplish this.

As promising as that sounded, the internal structure of the 'geopolitical Commission' failed from the start. Instead of centralising foreign policy competencies in the already complex institutional structure of the EU to create coherence, the new Commission President sacrificed decision-making efficiency in favour of member states' preferences for individual commissioners' posts. No fewer than five commissioners in the new

College are responsible for various areas of European foreign policy, from 'international partnership' to 'crisis management' to the controversial area of 'promoting our European way of life'.

The Libya debacle

Apart from this diffusion of responsibility within the Commission, the competencies between the Commission and other EU institutions have yet to be clarified. This was shown, for example, in the uncoordinated crisis communication in regard to the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, to which EU Council President Charles Michel responded in a public statement even before von der Leyen or Borrell had. Michel's visits to Turkey and Egypt were obviously not coordinated with the Commission and they created friction. And with it, the first nail in the coffin of would-be self-confidence in foreign policy was placed precisely in the EU's own institutional structure.

However, what have proved to be far more consequential are the divergences in interest among the member states, which have reached a new record high in clashes in the immediate vicinity of the EU. This was most evident in the ongoing civil war in Libya. Despite the media-celebrated meeting of several heads of state and government in January in Berlin (the Berlin Process), France and Italy have so far <link regionen naher-osten artikel detail tuerkische-ambitionen-in-nordafrika-4503>failed to subordinate their particular national interests to a common European approach. This means that in the 21st century, two founding states of the EU are now on opposite sides of a proxy war. In the face of any claim of a 'United States of Europe', this sounds as if Florida and California were fighting over oil in Nicaragua.

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However, Europe's handling of this war, which has been going on since 2014, had not yet hit rock bottom. In a desperate attempt to use at least a minimal compromise in the Libyan crisis for a European initiative, Borrell launched naval Operation Irini in March 2020. Although Irini's central goal only includes the implementation of the UN arms embargo against Libya, which had been imposed since 2011, the decision had been preceded by more than two months of conflicts over its details. The divergences of interest among the member states reached a sad climax when Malta threatened to veto the operation on the basis of migration policy and initially refused to confirm

the Italian admiral's confirmation for two weeks. The undisguised focus on their own interests with which the member states operate in the Libyan cause, as the other side of the twin trend, is less likely to lead to the development of a new European self-confidence than to slide the EU into complete foreign policy paralysis.

Europe's missed opportunity

Anyone who dismisses Libya as an individual case should be quickly reminded of developments in the rest of the region. In Syria, much to the annoyance of the EU, Hungary loudly stirs provocation by opening a consulate; in the Ukraine conflict, <link regionen europa artikel detail europas-chefunruhestifter-4034>France dreams of a common European security structure with Russia, while Estonia supplies pistols to the Ukrainian government; and in enlargement policy, a group of member states initially <link rubriken europaeische-integration artikel europa-verhindert-europa-3949>blocked the start of accession negotiations in the Western Balkans, thus triggering a political crisis in North Macedonia.

What is new about this imbroglio (and the EU's resulting inability to act in foreign policy) is the vehemence with which increasingly amused third parties enter the picture. In Libya, this is clearly the case with Turkey. Ankara took advantage of the EU's lack of commitment to negotiate a maritime corridor with the unified government in Tripoli, which violates Greek sovereign territory in the Mediterranean, in exchange for military assistance. After signing the memorandum, Turkish ships promptly intensified international gas drilling around Cyprus. At the same time, Operation Irini's inadequate mandate was revealed when Turkish warships prevented an Irini frigate from searching a suspected cargo ship. This was followed by repeated protests from Brussels, most recently at the Council meeting of EU foreign ministers last week. However, no agreement was reached on specific countermeasures in the event of further provocations or an extension of the Irini mandate.

The impression of helplessness in European foreign policy illustrates all the more clearly the toxic twin trend of rising demands on the one hand, and institutional structural difficulties and ongoing disagreement between the member states on the other. But while the coordination difficulties between the institutions can be expected to improve, the drifting apart of interests of the member states is likely to remain the greatest hurdle on the way to the EU's global political capability (according to Jean-Claude Juncker).

This is all the more regrettable, since the corona crisis and the US withdrawal from multilateral structures certainly open up <link rubriken europaeische-integration artikel ueberlegen-macht-ueberlegen-4431>opportunities for the EU to reposition itself on the global stage. However, this window is rapidly closing: China has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to fill the gap left by the US with its own claim to global leadership in dealing with the crisis. With broad-based disinformation campaigns, financial commitments in the immediate vicinity of the EU (including Serbia) and aggressive reactions to criticism of its course of action in Hong Kong, Beijing has made clear which instruments it is prepared to use. If the EU does not find a way to make its internal dissonances sound more harmonious, a fortissimo from Europe might only succeed in moving it offstage.



Moritz Wiesenthal
Berlin

Moritz Wiesenthal works at the Department of International and European Politics of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), where he also finished his PhD. Previously, he worked in the German Parliament, among others. He studied European Studies and International Relations in Magdeburg, Berlin and Nizhny Novgorod.

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